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ABSTRACT

During five meetings conducted in different states by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to gain insight into the status of 55 parent involvement programs from their organizers and implementors, parental involvement in the secondary education level repeatedly emerged as a shared concern. Following the meetings SEDL orchestrated A regional teleconference to share information about the implementation of Operation Fail-Safe at the secondary school level in the Houston Independent School District. The five specific objectives of Operation Fail-Safe included raising overall achievement and establishing shared responsibility and accountability between parents and schools. No one set plan was structured; instead each administrator was given flexibility to design strategies that best met Operation Fail-Safe goals and objectives in their school. A teacher educator's perspective on the importance of student/parent/teacher partnership is given and additional concerns such as the need to involve all kinds of groups from the community are raised. Contacts and resources for more information are included. (EJS)

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Parent-Involvement Update

From Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Volume 1, Issue 2 September, 1986

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS
A District-wide Approach

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INTRODUCTION

As part of its scope of work during the Spring of 1986, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory carried out a series of activities designed to gain insights into the status of parent involvement programs and networks within the five states of the region.

The initial effort involved a period of exploration during which descriptive information was collected about a total of 55 parent involvement programs throughout the five states. Some programs were visited, and in all cases descriptive information was obtained from appropriate staff and officials.

The identification of programs was followed by a series of state-by-state meetings of key representatives of state and local organizations and agencies, individuals whose work has influence over the implementation and development of programs such as those identified in the first activity.

The participants in each meeting included state department of education officials and staff, representatives of education professional associations, and representatives of parent, community, and advocate organizations.

The agenda for each state meeting included a get acquainted phase during which participants first introduced themselves and their agencies, organizations, or programs. This was followed by two presentations from SEDL staff; the first on institutional research on parent involvement in education, and the second on networking as a strategy for sharing information and for mutual support.

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Participants in each state concluded their meeting by identifying a list of concerns and priorities relating to the current practice and future prospects of parental involvement in their respective states.

The five state meetings were followed by a region-wide telephone teleconference in May of 1986 during which the lists of priorities and concerns from each of the five states were presented and discussed.

The summary report of that teleconference was SEDL's first mass communication directed to the emerging five-state regional network of parent involvement stake-holders, key individuals who in many cases represent state and local networks of parent involvement programs.

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AN EMERGING CONCERN: Parent Involvement in the Secondary Schools

Parental involvement in the secondary school level emerged as a clearly shared concern of participants in the five state meetings, and it was reaffirmed during the presentations at the regional teleconference in May of 1986.

Participants in these meetings expressed interest in learning about existing programs designed to involve the parents of secondary school students, since there was consensus that the intensity of parental involvement tended to decrease as children grew older. At the same time, participants agreed that the pre-adolescent and adolescent years of secondary school are critical times that demand as much attention from parents and teachers as the early elementary school years.

A teleconference format was chosen as an economical medium that would provide ample opportunities for interaction between presenter and audience, and among members of the audience which could be located in remote sites.

This first teleconference, a pilot effort featuring a district-wide parent involvement program, was held August 13, 1986, and it was directed to Texas educators. SEDL requested Ms. Marilyn Finer-Collins, who is Director of Secondary Guidance and Parent/Community Support for the Houston Independent School District(HISD), to be the main featured presenter.

Ms. Finer-Collins has had the responsibility for overseeing the implementation of Operation Fail Safe at the secondary school level for the Houston Independent School District.

Begun as a pilot project in 1977-78 school year, Operation Fail Safe has evolved over the last eight years into a system-wide, comprehensive effort to forge a partnership between home and school in order to provide an integrated quality education to all students in every school of the Houston Independent School District.

Ms. Finer-Collins agreed to provide an overview of the Fail Safe program, a description of the major parent involvement practices and policies, a description of the implementation strategies used, and an assessment of the current operation of the program.

At the same time, SEDL asked Dr. Ernest K. Dishner, Dean of the School of Education at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, to follow up on Ms. Finer-Collins' presentation about Fail Safe with his own comments regarding the implications of secondary school parent involvement efforts for teacher and administrator preparation.

SEDL approached the Texas Congress of Parents and Teachers, the Texas Federation of Teachers, and the Texas State Teachers Association and asked them to identify and select, from among their ranks, those individuals whom they thought could benefit the most from this presentation.

A total of 14 participants were identified and selected representing 11 different school districts from across Texas.

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SUMMARY REPORT OF A TEXAS TELECONFERENCE

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
FAIL SAFE: A district-wide Approach

Ms. Finer-Collins reported that operation Fail Safe is the strategy that the Houston Independent School District, a large and diverse urban district, is using to reach the goal of providing quality, integrated education to every student enrolled in its schools.

A key element of this strategy is the requirement that parents, students, and teachers work together on common goals to help students learn.

In a nutshell, "Operation Fail-Safe" was conceived as an effort to systematize parent support for student learning. The thrust of the program is accountability--of parents and educators--to promote learning, communication, and understanding.

An assessment of parents' perceptions of education indicated the need to concentrate on basic skills in the elementary level, and, for secondary school students, to increase students' awareness of career and higher education opportunities.

A companion survey of secondary students revealed a great range of occupational choices among the student population. This suggested the need to be both sensitive to the range of interests among students, and responsive to those interests at the programmatic level.

The specific objectives of Fail-Safe were spelled out as follows:

1. to design programs to raise the overall achievement of every student in the district
2. to develop a closer working relationship among students, parents, and teachers
3. to establish shared responsibility and accountability between the parent and the school for the child's educational career attainment
4. to allocate enough time, use a multiplicity of resources, and recognize that the more experiences a student brings to the learning situation, the more likelihood of success
5. To create a public awareness of the importance of shared responsibility by identifying a respected marketing expert to design a media campaign

A program of such magnitude required support from the school system in the form of training for every administrator, at least one teacher from each elementary school, and one counselor from each secondary school, who would serve as the Fail-Safe Coordinator in that school.

In order to decentralize the program, no one set plan was designed or structured for implementation and the day to day operations. Rather, each building principal was given the flexibility to design the strategies that best met the goals and objectives of Fail Safe in that school.

The district suggested that a committee be established in each building to work with the coordinator in planning the structure and activities for that building. The committee is to be representative of the various target audiences, and include the principal, counselors, faculty members, students, parents, and community representatives.

Inservice training and continuous support in the form of specially developed materials was provided by the district. In addition to the overall coordination by the district's Director of Parent Support Activities, each area office was assigned a guidance specialist who had responsibility for area

coordination of parental involvement and support activities.

Finally, more than one million dollars in "public service" time and space was secured from media outlets in Houston, including radio, television, newspapers, billboards, newsletters, etc. A mass media campaign was designed and implemented by top marketing experts to promote the program in the community. Employers were asked by the Superintendent to allow parents to "take an hour to two hours off their jobs" to meet with teachers and counselors.

Throughout the years of implementation, the district has moved towards setting up district-wide Fail Safe days, and has left the design of specific contents or themes for those days up the committees in each school.

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TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR PREPARATION FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT:
A Teacher Educators' Perspective

Following Ms. Finer-Collins initial presentation, Dean Ernest K. Dishner provided a perspective on the role of teacher training institutions in the preparation of teachers and administrators with respect to their future roles in promoting parental involvement.

In his view, there is a significant amount of rhetoric today regarding the need for collaboration, the need for partnerships, and yet, the most critical partnership has to be the student-parent-teacher partnership.

In that sense, HISD is to be commended for implementing a program that addresses that partnership. This kind of program was called very rare in education across the country. Although there are a few innovative programs here and there, in general, they are lacking.

In preparation for the teleconference, Dr. Dishner re-examined the State Board of Education's 1984 standards for preparation of teachers, and found that the only references to parent involvement of any sort appear in the requirements for the preparation of primary level teachers, and in a few instances in the preparation of special education teachers.

In other words, the state guidelines for the preparation of elementary and secondary teachers say little about preparing them to deal with the importance of parents' role in the education of children, and the importance of the parent-teacher-student connection.

Dr. Dishner expressed frustration with the expectation that many people have that the schools of education should be

producing Master Teachers. The development and nurturing of a Master Teacher, he believes, is a continuous process that extends well beyond an undergraduate program and indeed extends throughout the teacher's career.

Dr. Dishner believes that undergraduate teacher education programs can and must be improved. However, beyond an awareness stage of parental involvement's importance, the most important part of that preparation will be as part of the inservice training in programs such as HISD's Fail Safe.

Furthermore, there is no consistent format across the nation for graduate level programs wich deal with the inservice of secondary teachers. Therefore, school districts interested in implementing programs of the type described here (Fail Safe) will not get a great deal of help from the programs that universities currently have in place. This is a distressing sign, if we believe in the importance of the parent-teacher-student partnership and the important role secondary teachers can play in enhancing such an alliance.

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QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

Following Dr. Dishner's remarks, an open question and answer period followed. A summary of the questions, answers, and comments follows.

One participant asked about the reasons for setting the first Fail Safe day so early in the fall.
Ms. Finer-Collins explained that it was the Calendar Committee, composed of presidents of PTAs, teacher groups, and administrators in the district, who set the dates for the two Fail Safe days taking into account all other general needs, such as testing dates, inservice periods, holidays, etc.

Another participant asked if there is hard data to show that the Fail Safe program is more than just a big public relations gimmick designed to make the Superintendent and the School Board look good, or if in fact it has increased student learning.
Ms. Finer-Collins pointed to the overall increase in test scores over the last several years, and that also the number of parent-teacher conferences increased as well. However, no cause-effect relationship can be inferred from those data, and no systematic attempt has been made to have a control group, or to track the progress of children from involved parents versus those who did not involve themselves.

Dr. Dishner pointed out that given the scope of the Fail Safe program, it would be extremely difficult to design a research project using traditional methodology. Rather, attendance

records, anecdotal records, records of parent participation, and the like would be better suited for such a purpose.

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ADDITIONAL ISSUES, CONCERNS AND SUGGESTIONS

A number of issues, concerns, and suggestions were expressed by participants, not necessarily directed to any participant, person, or program. These include:

1. Involving all kinds of groups, and not just parents, but volunteers, senior citizens, and students from colleges and universities in children's education

2. Finding ways to involve college and university students, not just from education, but from psychology and other departments, in some form of voluntary work or internships so that they might provide services that could help students at the secondary level.

3. Getting the community, in particular young minority professionals, to take some responsibility for providing the type of involvement that certain parents cannot give to their children; something along the lines of Big Sister, Big Brother programs.

4. Involving outside resources, such as adopt-a-school volunteers, to work not only with gifted student programs and magnet schools, but also to do with remedial work with the students who need the most help.

5. Resolving the potential conflict between teacher's professional contractual expectations and special program demands to accommodate parent's schedules for conferences.

6. Handling issues related to alteration of the work day as attempts are made in school districts to increase parent/community participation through extending or altering the school day.

7. Providing flexible school district policies to allow teachers and other administrators to take advantage of "free" inservice training opportunities that may be available from the private business sector partners during school hours.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Participants indicated that the Fail Safe model may not be applicable to smaller school districts, where resources, both within the schools and in the larger community may be scarce.

It was proposed that a useful next step should be to identify programs or activities that can be implemented in smaller districts/communities, or at the building level.

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SELECTED RESOURCES AVAILABLE FORM SEDL
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"Teacher/Parent Parnership: Guidelines and Strategies for Training Teachers in Parent-Involvement Skills."
This is a report offering recommendations and methods for training elementary school teachers (preservice and inservice) to involve the parent in the educational process, both at home and at school.

"Models and Guidelines for Parnership in Education."
These are research-based guidelines and models that can help local groups and organizations collaborate more effectively in organizing and carrying out a partnership based on their community's conditions and school needs.

"Executive Summary of the Final Report: Parent Involvement in Education Project."
Summary of a comprehensive six-year study of attitudes and current practices of teacher educators, teachers, principals, parents, and school administrators in SEDL's six-state region.

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